Radical Living
Canterbury Shaker Village's enduring appeal

COURTESY OF CANTERBURY SHAKER VILLAGE

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Branch Line
Reflecting on Watertown’s past—and future

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Boston’s Buildings
Views of an ever-evolving skyline, from the water

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Extracurriculars
Events on and off campus in September and October

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FILM
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The Animation of Jan Lenica. This retrospective explores works by the Polish designer and illustrator. (October 21-30)

LECTURES
Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study
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Social Justice and the New Food Activism. Radcliffe fellow Julie Guthman discusses
From left: a detail from Procession, by Leonid and Rimma Brailovsky, at the Museum of Russian Icons; one of the photographs by Kippy Goldfarb at the Arnold Arboretum; Creamer and Sugar, Swans in Sky (2016), by Amber Cowan, at the Fuller Craft Museum
Terri Evans has a soft spot for Millennium Tower. The 60-story residential skyscraper, opened last year in Downtown Crossing, “is slim and graceful and conveys a sense of almost floating in the sky.” Yet she and the other volunteer Boston By Foot guides who lead architecture cruises along the Charles River and into Boston Harbor are evenly devoted to traditional icons—the Cape Ann, Longfellow Bridge—and happy to delve into the topography, politics, and history that have long configured Boston’s built environment. “I love how cities grow and change,” Evans says, “and the clues that are left behind that give insight into what was there before.”

Passengers embark at the Charles Riverboat Company’s dock on the Lechmere Canal in East Cambridge. The boat passes the Museum of Science, then slips beneath both the old Boston and Maine Railroad Bridge and the new Leonard P. Zakim Bunker Hill Memorial Bridge before entering the Charles River Dam’s locks, which open and close depending on the tides. Evans explains the inner harbor features views of Charlestown and the North End. Beyond, the financial district includes the Custom House Tower and India Wharf—the nineteenth-century center of international trade that’s now home to the Brutalist-era Harbor Towers.

Then it’s on to the Seaport District. The thriving business and tourist nexus was tidal mudflats until the late 1800s, then became cargo ship that had sunk there between 1850 and 1870. Also among the striking structures is the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), a sleek, Lego-like building that’s both cantilevered over the water and sited on part of the emerging 47-mile Harbor Walk. “Boston is this amazing city,” declares Evans. “People can actually walk throughout the landscape on a pedestrian path that’s at or near the edge of the water.” —N.P.B.
Radical Living
Canterbury Shaker Village’s enduring appeal
by NELL PORTER BROWN

Here’s nothing superfluous about Canterbury Shaker Village. That’s just the way members of the separatist Christian sect who lived on this New Hampshire hilltop for two centuries wanted it. The self-sufficient Shaker “brothers” and “sisters” worked hard and lived simply—pricing order, quality, cleanliness, and the common good. “Everything that was done here was done in the name of God,” says village tour guide Claudia Rein. “From the minute they got up in the morning, that was done here was done in the name of brothers” and “sisters” worked hard and on this New Hampshire hilltop for two centuries.

These days, visitors crest that same hill to see the 25 original white-clapboard buildings standing like stately parishioners them- selves on two acres of pastoral land under open skies. Rein calls it “magically spiritual,” to see “this place intact, these buildings that have been here for more than 200 years, un- touched. You can feel the presence of peace- fulness.” Panoramic views are unmarred by commercial elements. Out back, rows of veg- etable and flower gardens meet hay fields that slope to woodland trails and ponds.

Established in 1792, Canterbury was the sixth Shaker community. The uniquely American movement, derived from Quak- erism, was brought from England by a char-ismatic leader, “Mother Ann” Lee in 1774. Shakers revelled in ecstatic displays during worship—stomping, singing, dancing—that broke with the increasingly reserved Quakers. They also believed in the second coming of Christ, communal living, equality between the sexes, repentance in the form of confession, and celibacy.

Lee was illiterate. Revelatory visions, ex- perienced while imprisoned for her beliefs in England, informed her radical preaching in America. Rein says, but her ideas also like- ly stemmed from personal disillusionment:

...
Lee’s four children all died before turning six, and, unhappy in a forced marriage, she “became convinced that God wanted her to do something else with her life.” For a woman to declare herself a Christian prophetess was rare enough, notes Sue Maynard, a trustee of Canterbury Shaker Village Inc., the nonprofit that preserved and operates the village as a historic site and museum. But when “she and seven colleagues left England, they were it: these eight people who were nobodies, and had nothing, were the origin of this American religion.”

By the time Lee died a decade later, she’d attracted dozens of followers, established the first Shaker community in Niskayuna, New York, near Albany in 1779, and laid the groundwork for the spread of Shakersim. Nineteen Christian-based utopias ultimately developed, most in upstate New York and New England, but some as far away as Ohio, Kentucky, and Florida. And Shaker values, reflected in their elegant yet utilitarian furniture, household objects, and other products, would come to reflect traditional American sensibilities.

Other former Shaker sites, like Hancock Shaker Village (New York) and Pleasant Hill (Kentucky), are also open to the public and help shed light on the sect’s enduring legacy. But only Canterbury was “continually occupied by Shakers and has never been shut, or used as anything other than a Shaker Village,” notes Maynard. As the site’s unofficial historian, she has conducted “exhaustive and exhausting research” on all 900 people who ever lived at Canterbury, taken oral histories, and written the only full-length biography of the last brother to live there, Irving Greenwood, who died in 1939.

By the time Lee died a decade later, she “made sure they bought a cat, a 1807 REO,” she reports, “so instead of the long ride in the horse and carriage to Concord, they could drive there much more quickly.” The Shakers were not ascetics. They had plenty of food and clothing. Tasks rotated, so nobody got stuck with the dirtiest jobs for long. And everyone had free time. Maynard points out, and enjoyed “entertainments” in the form of community plays and concerts: “They were trying to make as good a life as they could.”

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Unfortunately, the Amish and Mennonites, Shakers also explored and gamely adopted—and often improved upon—outside technology and material goods. Canterbury Shakers developed and patented a commercial-sized washing machine, put it on display at the 1876 U.S. Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, and went on to sell models to hotels and other institutions. In 1889 they bought telephones, and 12 years later they installed electricity—even before New Hampshire’s capital city, Concord, did. Greenwood brought in a radio set in 1915, at the dawn of that era, and several years later, as modern household appliances began to appear, the Canterbury sisters eagerly purchased a KitchenAid mixer. “Then they got an electric refrigerator—and a Maytag washer,” Maynard notes.

This creativity and adaptability—and a series of talented elders—she says, made Canterbury one of the most successful Shaker communities. Yet what about it today draws 35,000 annual visitors, many from around the world? Why is there abiding interest in the Shakers, a religious sect that, at its mid-nineteenth century peak only had about 5,000 members? Some people who come are spiritually minded, others are utopian seekers, who “see this alternative communal organization as a model for the way that everyone could live,” Maynard says. Many are “struck by the achievements of these people who were basically uneducated in any formal way, but who designed and built these buildings, these objects, these businesses, simply from their own inspiration,” she continues. “From their own determination and imaginations, they created what they regarded as ‘heaven on earth.’ It’s a very American idea.”

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With dances and music, Rein said during a recent tour. A few people in the group knew the song “Simple Gifts,” written in 1818 by Maine Shaker Joseph Brackett (it became famous after Aaron Copland incorporated it in his orchestral suite Appalachian Spring), they sang it along with Rein at the end.

Shakers took their singing and fervent worshiping public to recruit converts, but not surprisingly, they were not always embraced, even in America. “In your town, if you saw a bunch of people in black hats and dark clothes shuffling and throwing themselves on the ground, and saying, ‘You are a sinner, come join us!’ Throw your lust away! You—leave your husband and join our sect?” Rein asked, “wouldn’t you pick up the phone and call the police and say, ‘Get these people off the street. They’re disturbing the peace!’?”

Within the Shaker communities themselves, sisters and brothers never touched. In 1829, the Canterbury Dwelling House was built, and the gender groups came and went through different doors, and stairways, and slept in separate quarters.

Yet they worked closely together, mindfully divvying up workloads and decision-making powers, even around finances. Always “entrepreneurs, inventors, and businesspeople,” Rein noted, they pooled their worldly assets upon conversion and worked collectively to earn money and sustain their communities. At Canterbury, a range of ventures developed over the years, from selling farm products, patented medicines, and clothing to cookbooks, household objects, and furniture.

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Canterbury was among the Shaker villages credited with pioneering commercial crops, grown for seeds, which they packaged and sold throughout much of the nineteenth century; it also produced tens of thousands of flat brooms, another Shaker invention. Canterbury physician Thomas Corbett (1780-1870) spearheaded the village’s pack-aged herb business, but more importantly, developed popular cure-alls, like his sarsa-pilla syrup compound, which residents produced, marketed, and sold for 10 years.

The village even had its own printing op-eration under the dynamic leader and Re-naissance man Henry Blinn. It became the locus of published materials for all of the Shaker communities, printing the monthly Mansfield and accepting jobs from outside the community as well. Visitors can explore the equipment used and learn about the ar-duous process that, by the 1890s, included typesetting done by some of the sisters.

Shakers were perfectionists, Rein noted, and their products are “synonymous with quality.” Tours highlight how their labor, and their products are “synonymous with quality.” Tours highlight how their labor,
other villages had closed or consolidated, and the flow of potential youthful converts ended as governments and charities developed orphanages and foster care. Among the last sisters to arrive at Canterbury and stay—Ethel Hudson, who came as a child in 1907—and the last sister to die there, in 1992. By 1979, with eight remaining Shaker sisters in Canterbury, the covenant was effectively closed. Leaders there “recognized that the era had passed for the original intent of the villages,” according to Maynard, “and that this was just the natural way of things.” (Two people still live at Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in New Gloucester, Maine, which is also open to the public.) Four years later, in 1993, a handful of Canterbury sisters laid plans to preserve the Shaker legacy and property by founding Canterbury Shaker Village Inc.

Village visitors come across the country, and from all over the world, to see the restored, original buildings and some of the thousands of photographs, artifacts, and documents that help explain who the Shakers were and what they might mean for the contemporary world. The BBC was there this spring to film the village and interview Maynard for its series, Utopia: In Search of the Dream.

Around that time, a tour included New Englanders and visitors from Maryland, Georgia, and California. What did they find compelling? “They were very spiritual people and they knew their purpose,” answered Mary Street, of North Reading, Massachusetts. For her husband, Scott, it was the “simple beauty” of the place, the furniture, and their relationship to spiritual beliefs. “That they were progressive and also part of the world—and being celibate,” he paused, considering the fact. “It’s strange, and sort of fascinating how they pulled that all off.”

Arriving at Canterbury Shaker Village, north of Concord, New Hampshire
Patio diners at Branch Line can watch the sun go down—and might even catch a breeze from the Charles River—amid the Watertown Arsenal’s historic red-brick buildings. The restaurant sits blissfully removed from traffic, and often feels as if it’s in its own quiet little neighborhood.

Then there’s the food. Branch Line is a partnership between the owner and the general manager of Eastern Standard, in Boston, and shares its brasserie-style flair. Slow-cooked French rotisserie chicken ($19/$38) and grilled steak ($24) rightly lead the menu. But the potato gnocchi with “beef-cheek ragu” and pecorino ($23) is a rich treat, or go for the more nuanced grilled branzino (whole fish, or filet), with olives, harissa, and a side of micro-greens ($28). The vegetarian entrée, though—featuring chunks of smoked eggplant over too-dry braised chickpeas and a layer of almond romesco—tasted something like a burnt oven smells.

Sides and starters had more zip. Steamed mussels came in a beer-laced broth spiced with Calabrian chiles ($14). The sugar-snap pea salad, with marcona almonds and loads of ricotta cheese and fresh mint, was crunchy and refreshing ($12). The lamb and pork meatballs drenched in sugo al pomodoro—classic tomato sauce—were divinely filling ($15).

There’s no hard liquor: Branch Line serves wine, beer, and mocktails. Friendly, assiduous staff can describe every one of the 20 rotating craft drafts. A few are familiar (German wheat-ale and Jack’s Abbey lager), but most are not. Note: the Tartare Rouge, from California’s Bear Republic Brewing Co., is sour red ale fermented with “airborne wild yeast and bacteria.”

Adventurous beer hounds are among the families, celebrants, and date-nighters who frequent Branch Line. Post-work relaxers who stream over from the arsenal’s 11 buildings boost the bar tab and neighborly vibe. No homes exist on the current “campus,” as the arsenal is now called by owner and primary occupier, Athenahealth (to which Harvard sold the property in 2013), but Branch Line is joined by a very good Mexican restaurant, La Casa de Pedro, and the Mohesian Center for the Arts (galleries, classrooms, and live theaters), along with a seasonal farmers’ market and special public events, like outdoor concerts. Fledgling trees, native plants, a central plaza, and other new landscaping are further signs of Athenahealth’s efforts to reinvigorate this corner of urban life. The oldest buildings date to the Civil War, but the arsenal itself (designed by Boston architect Alexander Parris, later known for Quincy Market) was originally established in 1816 by the U.S. Army, and is now on the National Register of Historic Places. (For self-guided tours, visit http://thearsenalonthecharles.com/history/walkingtour.)

For its part, Branch Line has integrated modern, industrial-chic décor with preserved elements like tall windows and exposed steel beams, and attracted a lively following—thus laudably linking community development and history through its delicious food. ~N.P.B.